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SUBJECT: UNESCO-OBIANG PRIZE FOR LIFE SCIENCES

¶1. In October 2008, UNESCO's Executive Board approved creation of the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences. The action was controversial. EU members with support from the United States delegation objected to naming a prize after a noted human rights violator. Opponents of the move did not have the support needed to prevail, however. The African Group which was then under South African chairmanship stood firm, insisted that the honor of Africa was at stake, and succeeded in turning the debate into one pitting developed countries against the G-77. The measure was adopted with France reading an explanation of position against the measure on behalf of its partners.

¶2. The issue has not gone away, however. The U.S. and other Western delegations have for some months been the object of a letter-writing campaign by human rights groups demanding that action be taken to rescind the prize. Responding to this pressure, newly elected Director-General Bokova (Bulgaria) announced shortly after taking office in November 2009 that she would freeze this and other prizes pending a review.

¶3. Bokova told Ambassador Killion February 19 that she had delayed the matter until at least May of this year (N.B. after the next meeting of the Executive Board March 30-April 15). She said she had told African states, who are still strongly supporting Equatorial Guinea, that UNESCO does not have enough applicants for the prize to award a winner. (Note: Bokova said she had 14 applications of which only five are from Africa, a situation that contrasts with most UNESCO prizes that have 60 or more applicants even when the purse is much smaller than the \$300,000 that is awarded the Obiang Prize winner. End Note.) Bokova warned the Ambassador, however, that she cannot delay things forever. "I am in the hands of the Executive Board," she said. "I cannot ignore a Board decision forever. I have given time for you to act."

¶4. Comment: Bokova is absolutely correct. She cannot ignore a Board decision, nor would we want her to do so. If the U.S. Government does not approve of this prize, this delegation will have to work with other like-minded states to have the Board adopt a decision amending or rescinding it. This could bring the U.S. into conflict with African states and will obviously be opposed by the Delegation of Equatorial Guinea. This Delegation would welcome Department's instructions on whether to proceed to seek Board action to revoke the prize.

Killion